

Isaac Bell House ("Edna Villa")  
70 Perry Street at Northwest corner  
of Bellevue Avenue and Perry Street  
Newport  
Newport County  
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-308

HABS  
RI,  
3-NEWP,  
44-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

## ISAAC BELL HOUSE "EDNA VILLA"

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Location: 70 Perry Street, northwest corner of Bellevue Avenue and Perry Street.

Present Owner: Mrs. Louise C. Kimball and Mr. Clive B. Kimball.

Present Occupants: Mrs. Louise C. Kimball and others.

Present Use: The building housed a nursing home until March, 1969. It is now being used as apartments.

Statement of Significance: This large house, built as a summer "cottage" in 1882-1883, is an early work of the architects McKim, Mead, and White. It is a typical example of the Shingle Style, and it is distinguished by the extreme open character of its planning.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

## 1. Original and subsequent owners:

The building is located in Plat 33, Lot 25. The following is an incomplete chain of title from Newport City Clerk's Records for the city of Newport. Reference is to number and volume of the Land Evidence Books, (LE8.--, P.--).

1881 Deed of August 13, 1881, recorded in LEB.51, p.135.

From: Alfred Smith  
To: Isaac Bell Jr.  
For: \$26,500

Isaac Bell Jr. was the original owner of the house, and he acquired the property with earlier buildings. Bell first appeared in Newport Directories in 1822, listed among the villa owners, LE8. 39, p.546.

On August 13, 1881 he bought a "parcel of land bounded...: Northerly by land and premises of Frederick W. Stevens and wife, two hundred and seventy three feet, Easterly on Bellevue Avenue one hundred sixty and 8/10 feet, Southerly on Perry Street, two hundred and seventy three and 88/100 feet, and Westerly by lands of Samuel Powel, one hundred and fifty five 8/10 feet,

said parcel containing about one acre of land, together with all the buildings and improvements thereon standing. Being the same premises and all of which was conveyed to this grantor by deed from Nathan Appleton, dated December 23, 1880..."

- 1891 Deed of September 9, 1891, recorded in LEB.63, pp. 352-353.  
  
From: Heirs of Isaac Bell Jr.  
To: Samuel Barger  
For: \$32,500 plus a mortgage of \$30,000, the total being \$62,500.
- 1952 Deed of April 19, 1952, recorded in LEB. 178, p.217.  
  
From: Edna H. Barger, heir of Samuel F. Barger  
To: Leonard J. DeSantis et ux  
For: an undisclosed sum
- 1956 Deed of February 8, 1956, recorded in LEB,189, p.302.  
  
From: Leonard J. DeSantis et ux  
To: Louise C. Kimball and Ruth Leland
- 1960 Deed of September 16, 1960, recorded in LEB. 201, p.592.  
  
From: Arthur Leland, heir of Ruth Leland  
To: Louise C. Kimball  
  
Arthur Leland relinquished his interest in the property by quit claim deed.
- 1966 Deed of November 9, 1960, recorded in LEB. 217, p.519.  
  
Louise C. Kimball modified the title to the property to the joint tenancy of Louise C. Kimball and Clive B. Kimball.

2. Date of erection: 1882-1883
3. Architect: McKim, Mead, and White
4. Builder or contractor: Mr. P.E.Read of Hartford
5. Original plans: none known
6. Alterations and additions: The library, originally semi-

circular in form, was enlarged to its present size at an undetermined but apparently early date. The early form is clearly visible in the basement where the original foundation walls and floor framing are exposed. The present owners, who acquired the property in 1956 and have operated a nursing home in the house, subdivided the dining room, parlor, and library by introducing partitions, but not otherwise disturbing the original construction.

7. Important old views and descriptions:

- a. Old views: South facade photograph, p.23, ground floor plan, p.27, Sheldon, George William, ed. Artistic Country Seats, Vol. I., New York:Appleton and Co., 1886-87.  
Drawing of hall showing the fireplace without the glass shield, The Century Magazine, May, 1886.
- b. Description: Sheldon, George William, ed., Artistic Country Seats, Vol. I., pp. 23-27:

"Mr. Isaac Bell's (Jr.) House

This villa, built about four years ago, at Newport, by Messrs. McKim, Meade, and White, is of a modernized colonial style, the principal feature on the east front being the double gables, in one of which is an old treatment of triple windows. Each gable is thirty-two feet wide and twenty feet high from the eaves, and faced with cut shingles; and between them is a very elaborate leader-box of galvanized iron. There is also an elliptic window in the north gable. Three chimneys, the highest about twenty feet above the roof, are plainly treated, though one of them has an intricately-wrought iron brace serving purposes both useful and ornamental. A glimpse of a tower on the south side also appears--but more of this further on. The windows in the gables all have small lights of glass, and above them are ornamental arches of carved wood.

The second story is of shingles, and the first story is of brick. The piazza, extending across the whole width of the east front, is, on the north side, octagonal and two stories high, with an open balcony on the second floor and a shingled roof, and projecting eleven feet from the main piazza line, being twenty-two feet wide in all with a total depth

of twenty-five feet. At the south side, a small square projection, eleven feet from the main piazza line, and sixteen feet wide, runs around the south side of the house, one story high, with a shingled gable, whose roof is supported on turned posts, having small projecting brackets at the upper portion. There is an entrance to the piazza on this east side, but the main entrance is on the south.

The extreme length of this south side is one hundred feet, the extreme length of the east side eighty feet, and the extreme height of the building, including the tower, fifty-two feet. By far the principal feature of the south side is this tower -- round, eighteen feet in diameter, of brick on the first floor and shingled above. The entire first story of the house is of brick, the angles being finished with quoin-blocks of different-colored bricks. All the second story is shingled. A two-story window, with a carved wood panel between the upper and lower part, about on a line with the eaves of the main roof, constitutes a feature of the tower. All the courses of the roof have cut shingles, and there is a wrought-iron finial on the tower.

At the extreme east of the south side of the house is a small octagonal bay, with turned posts at each angle, and with small lights in all the sashes. Between the bay and the tower is an ornamental panel of diamond-shaped shingles. The piazza extends along the south side, from the tower to the east end, and one also sees the upper story of a north piazza. Instead of a railing, a brick wall receives the columns of the piazza, giving it a more substantial appearance. In the roof are two "winkers", which admit of a single pane of glass each, being more for ventilation than anything else, and accomplishing this object without introducing any hard lines, since they consist simply of a slight raising of the roof in two places. A noble chimney, twenty feet high and five feet wide, has a surface treated as a series of perpendicular ribs, projecting very slightly--just enough to get a simple shadow.

The main entrance is on the same side--an old fashioned split door, heavily paneled. There is a landing-step for the convenience of those about to leave their carriages. Directly over the entrance the porch roof projects in circular shape, being supported from the piazza-columns by ornamental brackets, in order to give protection from the rain, thus answering in part the purpose of a porte-cochere.

To the west the kitchen wing is lower than the main building, and very simple in treatment, the first story of brick and the second of shingles. The roof of the house is shingled throughout.

Certain aspects of the interior of Mr. Bell's house deserve special mention. You enter a vestibule about nine feet by seven, containing an elaborate seat, and opening into the hall, thirty feet by twenty-four. At the right is a door into the reception-room, and beyond it one into the drawing-room. Directly opposite the entrance is the dining-room, and at the left of the entrance Mr. Bell's room, and between Mr. Bell's room and the dining-room, the staircase-hall. Considerable pains have been taken with the decoration of the main hall, while at the same time the effort has been to preserve simplicity. The finish is in oak, with a base eighteen inches high. Immediately around the fireplace is an extensive space of tiling, and a row of marble seats runs between the staircase and Mr. Bell's room. The mantel is of carved wood, and on either side of the fireplace is a small window of leaded glass, while in front of it stretches a hearth five feet wide, of red tile.

Opposite the staircase, eight feet wide, appears an open transom, supported on carved brackets. The cornice of the hall is richly carved and molded, and in front of the staircase a series of doors into the drawing-room can be rolled back, thus making the entrance-opening sixteen feet wide and eight feet high. To the right, a smaller door leads into the reception-room before mentioned. The dining-room doors are elaborately paneled and a sheathed wainscoting eight and a half feet high gives height to the hall. A beautiful and much-carved screen, with panels of wood, separates the staircase from the fireplace, while over the fireplace the ceiling is lowered somewhat, being eight feet four inches instead of ten feet and a half, as in the main hall, in order to give a comfortably cozy look to the recess.

Standing at the dining-room door, and looking toward the vestibule, the entrance to the latter appears very wide--eight feet square, with an open lattice-work transom. To the right appears the door leading into Mr. Bell's room, and also the end of the fireplace recess, which is all tiled, with a large marble panel in the center. The dimensions of the dining-room are twenty feet by twenty-eight; it is paneled six feet high in mahogany, and above this, between the top molding of the wainscot and

the cornice, are panels of rattan in the wall-spaces, and in each panel of rattan is a small square panel of perforated brass ornament--old curiosities collected by Mr. Bell. Very handsome is the mahogany cornice. The ceiling is treated like the side-walls--with a mahogany border three feet wide; separating this from the inner ceiling, which is divided into square panels, is a richly carved molding; while the inner ceiling itself is laid out in squares of rattan, two feet wide, by a very light molding. There are about sixty of these rattan squares, the central one being arranged for gas fixtures. To the right of the room, as you enter, are three windows open to the floor and out into the octagonal piazza on the east side. On the opposite side the buffet is recessed into the wall, and divided into compartments for drawers, cupboards, shelves, and so on; the doors of the lower central part being elaborately carved, and all the hardware on them and on the drawers in antique brass of hammered and cut work. Directly above the buffet the space is finished in the form of a cove, with a shelf, supported on a small wooden bracket, running the whole width. Opposite the entrance-door, the fireplace, easily the chief feature of the room, has its lower part faced with marble, and a long low recess with a marble shelf above, while higher still the mantel proper is divided into three compartments which have glass doors, with a pattern in cathedral and square beveled plate glasses, the plan being a very flat octagonal, supported by two beautifully carved and turned posts at either side of the marble facing. Two windows at either side of the mantel open out into the yard at the north, and the upper part of their trim has a small balustrade, used for holding plates.

Mr. Bell's room shows a handsome mantel of painted pine, and a tile hearth two feet wide extending as far as the windows. A double window, opposite the entrance-door, has a seat, with drawers and lockers underneath. The entire left side of the apartment is filled with bookcases four and a half feet high, also of painted pine, the lower part being fitted up with drawers and the upper part with shelves. A simple sheathed wainscoting extends from the fireplace to the window, four and a half feet high. There is a wooden cornice, and about a foot below it a picture strip.

In the drawing-room, the facing of the fire-opening is of tiles in a brass frame; above them projects the mantel-shelf proper, and higher still a beveled

mirror in a handsome frame of carved wood. Below the mirror is a small shelf, supported on a number of carved brackets; and below the shelf an ornamental frieze of festoons and ribbons. To the left of the fireplace swings the heavily-paneled door of the dining-room; to the right a window opens out into the octagonal piazza. There is a base about two feet high, with its upper portion fluted; also a wooden cornice and picture strip, between which runs a painted frieze of garlands and flowers, about a foot wide. Two windows, cut to the floor, open upon the east piazza opposite the entrance from the hall, and are five feet wide; while, opposite the fireplace, the trim of the sliding doors into the reception-room consists of a projecting cornice of about six inches, supported on light carved brackets, there being also a small balustrade on the cornice itself. The wall-spaces are in silk; the wood-work throughout is pine, painted in white and gold. It may be added that painting is more common now than three years ago, when the rage was for "wood-fillers" and natural woods. Particularly in parlors and bedrooms, light effects are desired, but rich dark tones of mahogany and oak are still considered suitable for dining-rooms and halls.

Mr. Bell's reception room has a tiled opening, with a brass rim around its fireplace, and the mantel-shelf is handsomely carved, while the mantel extends up to the height of the picture strip, and is of wood. There is a base fifteen inches high, and the space between the picture strip and cornice is a painted frieze of leaf-work. The cost of the house was about seventy-five thousand dollars."

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

The second owner, Samuel F. Barger, Cornelius Vanderbilt's lawyer was brought to Newport by Vanderbilt. Barger named the house "Edna Villa" after his daughter. See Elliot, Maud Howe, This Was My Newport, Cambridge, Mass.:

Mythology Co., 1944.

Newport Mercury, January 26, 1889. The obituary of Isaac Bell, Jr. states his involvement in politics and business, particularly with the House of Brown Brothers and Co. in New York and with the starting of a cotton brokerage in Savannah, Georgia. He retired in 1877. In 1878, he married and "soon after purchased an estate on Bellevue Ave., at the corner of Perry Street and began building a handsome cottage upon the same." He changed his residence from New York to



Newport." He was one of the "best known and highly esteemed of Newport's adopted citizens... a devoted husband, indulgent father, a firm friend and genial companion..."

C. Sources of Information:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:  
Records of Deeds in the Newport City Hall.
2. Secondary and published sources:  
Newport City Directories in the Newport Historical Society.  
Moore, Charles, The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim, Boston: Houghton, 1929.  
Downing, Antoinette F. and Scully, Vincent J. Jr., The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island, New York: Clarkson N. Potter, second edition, 1967.
3. Likely sources not yet investigated:  
Office records of McKim, Mead, and White.  
Bell family papers.

Prepared by Thomas M. Slade  
University of Notre Dame  
Project Historian  
June, 1971

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This is a typical example of the Shingle Style with characteristic surface textures on both exterior and interior walls, and distinguished by the extreme open character of its planning.
2. Condition of fabric: Although the physical condition of the structure is fairly sound, the grounds and the state of preservation are only fair.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 106 feet by 99 feet; irregular layout; three stories.
2. Foundations: Exterior foundation walls are of fieldstone with a roughly dressed surface on the outer face. Interior foundation walls are brick.

3. Wall construction: First floor walls are red brick laid in red mortar with narrow joints. A quoining pattern is worked out in very smooth-faced brick which contrasts in texture only slightly with the coarser faced intervening brick. The upper walls and large gable ends are covered with shingles, with ends cut in various shapes and arranged in horizontal patterns. The shingles have a natural weathered finish.
4. Structural system, framing: The masonry structure in the exterior walls is continuous throughout the first floors. The exterior walls above the first floor, and the interior construction are frame.
5. Chimneys: There are four tall brick chimneys with panelled faces.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways: All doors are panelled wood, set in simple door frames in the brick wall. There are five exterior openings: two rear doors from the service rooms, two side doors, and the main door on the south. The main door has twelve panels, divided six over six in a Dutch door arrangement.
  - b. Windows: Most windows are double hung, with the larger lower sash of undivided single panes of plate glass. The smaller upper sashes are composed of small 6 1/2" x 7" panes. Windows on the east side of the house opening onto the porch have a six foot lower sash at floor level which can be raised allowing access to the porch. Louvered shutters are in place on most windows. They were originally painted a warm, medium gray, now green. First floor window sills are of brownstone.
7. Roof: Gabled and hipped roofs are steeply pitched at the top with flatter pitches on lower roofs with modern asphalt shingles. There are very shallow eaves with simple wood moldings. A semi-circular bay at the southwest corner of the house terminates in a bell-shaped roof with a spiral finial.
8. Porches, stoops, and bulkheads: A one-story porch wraps around the south and east sides of the house becoming two stories at the northeast corner. The wooden floored porch has a brick parapet on which stand turned wood columns in a bamboo pattern to carry the low-pitched roof. The roof swings out in a segmental projection over the steps to the

front door. The projection is carried on two carved wood dragon heads. There is a later back porch at the northwest corner.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The house has an irregular main block with a block of service rooms to the northwest. The main block is developed around a large central hall, a great hall, which is reached through a vestibule from the main door. A broad stairway leads from the hall to the upper floor. The principal rooms open from the hall: a reception room to the southeast, the parlor to the east, the dining room to the northeast, and the library to the southwest. The reception room and parlor, and the parlor and dining room connect through broad sliding doors. The parlor and dining room open to the hall through very wide doorways with sliding partitions. Thus, together with the windows giving access to the porch, the entire sequence of interior and exterior spaces can be merged in a fluid arrangement which suggests an oriental inspiration, echoed in the bamboo columns of the porch. The service block contains two pantrys, a large kitchen, servants' hall, and rear stairway. The second floor is also arranged around a central hall, with four large bedrooms, and two bathrooms. Over the service rooms are two small bedrooms, a bathroom, and several closets. The third floor repeats the central hall, but on a smaller scale. There are three large rooms and several small rooms and a series of closets.
2. Stairways: The main stairway with a broad eight foot wide first run leads from the central hall to the U-shaped hall above. At the landing the open well stairway contains a large pair of windows partly filled with colored glass which furnish the principal light for both the upper and lower halls. Thus, the stairway is given visual prominence in the interior. A velvet covered rope which originally served as the railing on the first run of stairs, is now in a third floor closet and has been replaced by a simple wood railing. Other stairway details include square newels with flat carved ornament, three slender turned balusters per step, and a molded handrail on the upper run of steps. The walls of the stair well are covered with vertical panelling. A separate, straight run flight of stairs, connecting the second floor hall to the third floor, is located at the opposite side of the hallway. This run also has slender turned balusters. A rear service stair runs from the basement to the third floor.

A dumbwaiter in the service wing has been closed.

3. Flooring: The house contains oak flooring, 1 3/4" or 2" wide.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: First floor central hall: The walls are oak vertically panelled to 8 feet 4 inches, with a two foot wide band above, covered with dark green and gold embossed wallpaper. The complex Tudor panelled ceiling is oak.

Parlor: The ceiling and walls are plaster. A low wood wainscot serves as a base for the walls. The walls and woodwork are painted white.

Dining room: Walls have raised panelling 6 feet high with plaster above. The ceiling is enframed by a wide wood border. All the woodwork is dark stained mahogany.

Library: Walls are wood panelled with built-in bookcases at intervals, four and 1/2 feet high. Upper walls are plaster covered with embossed wallpaper.

Reception room: The plaster walls and ceiling, and the woodwork are painted white.

Bedrooms: The southeast bedroom on the second floor is the most fully decorated bedroom. Plaster walls are capped with two and 1/2 foot high basket work. Other bedrooms have plaster walls and ceilings with simple wood trim. Bathrooms have tiled floors and wainscoting, marble topped sinks, with marble floors under fixtures.

5. Doorways and Doors: First floor central hall: Sliding doors to the parlor and dining room are of panelled oak.

Parlor and reception room: Rooms are connected by wide sliding doors.

6. Special decorative features: First floor central hall: The fireplace with its large tile faced opening, is in a recessed bay. The richly worked wall surfaces of open spindle work panels, some of which are backed with metal, are oak, stained nearly black. This stained work is not in character with the other woodwork in the house.

Parlor and reception room: Each room has an elaborate fireplace with delicate carved and turned overmantel decoration enframing the mirrors.

Dining room: A large buffet is built into the panelled east wall. The fireplace along the north wall with marble facing and mantel shelf is topped with an over-mantel containing large built-in cupboards.

Library: The fireplace with marble facing has a mantel shelf supported by Ionic columns. The overmantel mirror is framed with Corinthian columns.

Southeast bedroom: The fireplace composition contains the mantel with double shelves carried on spindle work. The mantel continues to the right as a built-in cabinet, with drawers under triple shell-niche cupboards. Other larger bedrooms have fireplaces.

7. Hardware: Most of the hardware is brass. White porcelain knobs are on the doors of the bedrooms. The exposed rollers and overhead tracks for the sliding doors leading into the parlor are made a decorative feature.
8. Lighting: Originally all fixtures were gas. The original vestibule lamp remains, having been converted to electricity.
9. Heating: Modern heating system

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces south on a level lot at the northwest corner of Perry Street and Bellevue Avenue. A lawn with large trees opens from the porch around the east side of the house.
2. Historic landscape design: None
3. Outbuildings: A later three-car garage is located at the northwest corner of the lot. A separate oval drive leads to the south side of the house.
4. Walks: None

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

Newport HABS Project -- 1969. Sponsored in cooperation with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Antoinette F. Downing, Chairman. Under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of HABS, and Osmund Overby, (University of Missouri), Project

Supervisor, Thomas B. Shubert, (University of Illinois), Student  
Architect, Jack E. Boucher, photographer.